

HONDURAN REGIME NEAR SLIPPING IN BANANA UPRISING

Low Prices of Fruit and
High Costs of Living
Create a Crisis.

EVERYBODY 'PINCHED'

Strike Led by Plantation
Owner Almost Results in
New Revolution.

Special Despatch to THE NEW YORK HERALD.

New York Herald Bureau,
Washington, D. C., Feb. 19.

Uneasy are the heads of a nation whose chair of state rests on banana peel.

Down in Honduras the only thing that kept the chair of state from sliding off for a fall was the timely arrival of the U. S. S. Sacramento a few months back.

Now another disturbance is predicted.

Stark red revolution was rearing its head in the banana province of Atlantida, all unknown to the great American public.

The high cost of living, with low wages on the plantations, and the low price of bananas were at the bottom of the trouble.

It was the old story of an agricultural community going in for a profitable business and neglecting to raise its own food. Then, when the profits fell through outside causes and big business control, the small planter, the merchant and the laborer all felt the pinch.

The present Government of Honduras has lost the sympathy of practically all classes in the Atlantida province and the city of Chama.

Col. Ramon Lagos was appointed Governor of Atlantida, supposedly to ingratiate himself with the disaffected voters and to win their support for election to the Presidency. This would constitute the present party in power.

At any rate, Gov. Lagos failed to prevent overt acts when a general plantation strike broke out. It appeared obvious that neither he nor his superiors would use repressive measures unless there was destruction of private property.

The strikers were ably led and advised. They contented themselves with carrying away what they wanted, but were careful not to destroy property.

In its inception the strike was unique in that it was led by a small plantation owner, Jacobo P. Munigua. He exerted complete control over the dissatisfied workers, but the situation was beginning to get out of hand when the United States warship arrived.

Its presence stiffened the backbone of the Honduran Government and the arrest of several strike leaders followed, with the collapse of the impending revolution, which was being more or less openly advocated.

The strikers began by contending for an increased wage from \$1.25 a day to \$2.50 a day, the working day being eight hours.

The direct result of the strike was an increase from \$1.25 to \$1.75 a day, with double time for overtime.

There was nothing Solovievsk about the Honduran disturbance.

Even the present Government has long realized that living conditions, especially in Atlantida, were becoming increasingly difficult.

During the political campaign in 1919 candidates now in office were before the voters promising if elected to give the aid of the Government to the underpaid plantation laborers.

This is one of the reasons the Government hesitated to act during the late outbreak. Early repressive measures undoubtedly would have changed the strike into a revolution in very short order.

At any rate, the disaffection was partly allayed, for the time, at least.

The chair of state still maintains its precarious resting place on the banana skin.

But Col. Ramon Lagos, Governor of Atlantida, has lost his job.

Col. Manuel Matute is the new Governor of Atlantida. He is credited with being a man of energy and force, and withal of being a convivial person. The Honduran republic expects him to maintain order, but without harshness or undue use of the mailed fist.

Events in Atlantida this month and the next will tell whether or not he is succeeding.

There are two sides to the story of the Atlantida near-revolution which must be heard before an intelligent opinion can be reached on the merits of the controversy.

First comes the plight of the plantation laborer that the wage of \$1.25 a day was not sufficient properly to support him and his family.

This is well founded, according to advices received by the United States Government.

In the coastal regions of Atlantida practically all of the laboring man's food is imported. This includes not only manufactured products, but rice and beans, the principal staples, as well.

These all come from the United States. To the original selling prices must be added the cost of transportation and the Honduran import duties. Even the much needed rice and beans must pay a tax of from one to two cents to enter Honduras.

When banana cultivation became centralized by the United Fruit Company and other concerns and the raising of the other foodstuffs was discontinued, commissaries were established by these big plantations.

With the high cost of the imported foods sold by the companies which were able to keep down competition and wages, the discontent naturally was directed at these concerns. One of these, the Yacaro Brothers Company, was hit by the strike throughout its entire operation.

The standard of living in the Caba region is low. The adults wear comparatively few clothes and the children in very many cases wear no clothes at all. This explains how it was at all possible for a laborer to keep his family on the daily wage of \$1.25 on and near the large plantations.

In the interior, where foodstuffs are raised for home consumption and the requirements as to clothing are the same, the wage would have been considered ample for the class of work performed.

With these conditions it is easy to see that the laborer in the coastal banana and sugar cane fields practically was forced to rely on company commissaries for food.

There is a wide margin between the prices these companies pay for their bananas and the prices for which they market them. The companies have an explanation which will be given further on.

The laborer is not interested in explanations. He sees the companies pay 50 cents a 100 pounds for bananas at the ship. Then he reads the New Orleans market quotations and learns that the same bananas sell for \$5.50 a 100 pounds.

The small planter has a grievance against the United Fruit Company. Bananas are supposed to be paid for on delivery at the railway. However, the fruit is not inspected until it gets to the ship, and then may be and often is rejected. As the fruit is handled by the company's employees or under their supervision from the time it gets to the railway, the planters contend that the inspection and rejection should be made then and there.

Obviously this would relieve them from loss due to damage or spoiling of fruit en route to the vessel. At any rate the independent plantations assert they are running at a loss. They fear they will go the way of others and have to borrow money from the company's bank, the Banco Atlantida, and eventually may have to sell out at the company's price and terms.

Some of the smaller plantation owners profess their willingness to raise laborers' wages and contend the necessity for paying more, but contend that the monopoly prevents this by forcing them to take low prices for their product.

Now comes the argument of the United Fruit Company. The big difference between the buying and selling prices of the banana is necessary owing to the unusual business conditions prevailing in this trade, it is contended.

Losses due to strikes and revolutions, excessive risks and high operating costs constitute a tremendous overhead which must be met. Rates of insurance are another factor, being quite high. Lack of a stable, dependable Government is given as the principal cause for the continued existence of many business evils.

The present situation is unique. The Honduran Government, which restored order finally, is not in favor with the planters, big or small, nor with the merchants and professional classes in Atlantida. The laborers were only partly pacified.

The fruit companies all would like a change of Administration, and so express themselves.

Honduras is quiet. It has all the appearance of the calm before a storm.

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bedding, comforters and blankets, library

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